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Jokes

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JOKES

AT THE SOUND of his name he trots onto the little stage and starts talking. Touches his hair, feels around in it gingerly. What's left is obstinate, curly, sandy gray.

Not exactly lush, he says, bringing forth the first laugh, a small, localized wind.

Those styling competitions? he says. *They ought to start with a Problem Head.*

He shrugs. He owns a lexicon of twitches and self-mocking grimaces. *You know what I love? How people name their hair-cutting shops. The Best Little Hairhouse. Shear Genius. Shotsie's Kut & Kurl. I got a hundred of these. New Hairizons. The Hair Apparent. The Head Shed.*

He takes a huge ruminative breath. *The Hairway to Heaven. Curl Up & Dye.*

Tress Chic.

Well, there's something relentless about it. Gives you faith—almost. It's like they can't help themselves. This urge overpowers them.

But I like that everything has a name. Means we're paying attention. Suggests we're more or less on top of things, if you get my drift. Also suggests that things happen only once—and I'd have to include people here, too, wouldn't I? No two of them alike. Which is kind of interesting.

Not funny exactly—I'd be the first to admit that. But worth considering, no?

He fills his cheeks, lifts his eyebrows, pops his lips. *Had somebody in my family named Freeloze. Woman. Married a guy named Truworthy. Imagine. Well, it was in the sixties, what do you expect?*

No, no, no. The 1660s.

They were very big on the virtues in those days. Constancy, Forbearance, Serenity, like that. All thought they were going to heaven.

Four hundred years ago.

Man, picture four hundred years from now. Year 2400?

I'm at a dead loss, I'll tell you.

Time's too weird for words, don't you think? Even a year can seem gargantuan.

He flaps back his sleeve, slapstick, squints at an imaginary wristwatch, taps the imaginary crystal. *Even ten minutes.*

He'll have to get them going, sooner or later, but isn't there a good mood rampant in the air, a *willingness*? He has to admire them for that. He spreads his arms, all-inclusively, asks, *Aren't you happy it's me up here, and not you?*

That's what my wife used to say: They're just happy it's not them up there acting like idiots.

He disassembles for a moment, shuffles, shakes his bowed head, then springs abruptly down to floor level. He offers to pass the mike to a young guy at the frontmost table. The guy seizes up, like he's frozen a bearing—whatever in God's name did he do to bring this on?

No, no, it's OK, he assures the guy, brotherly. You'd think of something to say. Trust me. Nature abhors a vacuum. Honestly.

Then, bang, he flips his attention to this fellow's companion, his pretty girlfriend or wife. *Now I bet he's got plenty to say sometimes,* he says. She claps a hand over her mouth. *I'd guess more than enough, on some occasions. Fascinating stuff, too, right? I mean gripping. Truly riveting. OK, OK. But tell the truth, you'd miss it if he were gone. Yes or no?*

What else can she do but treat this as more banter? *Yeah, I might,* she says, bantering back.

What? he asks. *Can't hear.*

I might miss it.

Ah. Very good. That should comfort him terrifically. He smiles, scans the deeper audience, letting the tension evaporate. Leaving, he reaches out and ruffles the poor guy's hair. *Nice,* he says. *Least you don't have a Problem Head.*

Back on stage, he fingers the little groove under his nose. *The nasal frenum,* he says.

If your hands sweat too much? Palmar Hyperhydrosis. No, I'm serious. It's a precise world.

I love the names for things: Kingfishers. Butterfly nuts. Filberts. Tungsten. Gentian violet. After the first few he wings it. Astigmatism. Visigoth. Spelunker. Some nights this is actually a joy. He pops the words out, lets them hang as if visible, as if his mouth has become a kaleidoscope, a little factory for producing the miraculous.

Dulcimer, astrolabe, catamaran.

And he likes (he doesn't say this) how he is in two places at once, how he can talk talk talk, wearing that cheesy, half-astonished smile, and at the same instant be back inside taking stock, ragging on himself. And how he can even let himself be wafted, *contorted*, on a curl of desire and memory. For there's a woman out in the middle distance, in a spray of light: black rayon with a deep scoop—her chest is wide and flat, with a light sheen, the breastbone making a smudge of shadow. Reminiscent of Margo. Don't his eyes *always* find one? They're as corrupt and unquenchable as his lips.

Margo as she was. Margo before the wig, before the head wrap, the silk scarves, when she had an acre of hair that could be cut, styled. It was like black gold, like heat lightning... or like *what, like what?*

But the thing to do is stay on task. Nobody wants to see a man drifting. He was discussing the names of things.

Even things we can't see have names. Such things as emotional states—which is to say your brain chemistry.

I'm taken aback, you might say. I'm incredulous. Stupefied. Snafu'd. All bollixed up.

I'm stumped, I'm in a fog, dazed and addled. I'm disconcerted. I'm rattled, you might say. Blown away, dumbfounded, thunderstruck, flabbergasted.

I'm zonked, irretrievably out of it, deeply unconvinced, heavily into denial. I'm aggrieved. I've been blindsided, taken it in the shorts, had the legs cut out from under me, have no place in this goddamned world to stand.

Man, there's no end to what you can feel.

Or maybe there is.

Maybe there is.

He hits that split second, that fragile place where everything can turn, and he turns it back, and lets fly with a run of easy, domesticated jokes. One or two of Margo's favorites. But he will not stoop to a litany of all those little things that irritate him about life. No sir.

And when he's done there's that water-over-rocks sound of applause. He steps back, light-headed—gulped in too much oxygen—and he thinks, *light-headed, what a weird expression*, and trots

off the way he came. Already, it's someone else's turn. He steps outside where it's the middle of the night, but not yet truly cold or dark. Trucks are humming on the highway, there's a low continuous sizzle from the signs that are everywhere.